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SUBJECT: SLOVENIA BIOTECH: EMBASSY HOSTS FARMER TO FARMER
ROUNDTABLE

REF: A. LJUBLJANA 141

[1](#)B. (05) LJUBLJANA 512

[1](#)1. Summary. On September 5, 2006 Embassy Ljubljana and FAS Vienna rounded out a year-long effort to create an open, science-based dialogue on agricultural co-existence in Slovenia. Our aim has been to help shape new legislation to reflect a fair and balanced approach to a sometimes emotional issue in Slovenia. Speakers at the event, which took place in Slovenia's second city, Maribor, were Fred Yoder and Bob Fiddeman. Yoder is an American farmer of both conventional and biotech crops and former president of the National Corngrowers Association, and Fiddeman is a British farmer who took part in biotech planting trials in Britain and who has served on the biotech negotiating team for the National Farmers Union of England and Wales. Both farmers made the case for an open agriculture regime that accommodates organic, conventional and biotech crops. They also stressed the importance of communication between neighboring farmers as the key to successful co-existence. The turnout on the Slovenian side was smaller than hoped for due to fine weather and an earlier than expected harvesting season. Nonetheless, key decision makers, including the president of the farmers union, the Ministry of Agriculture drafters of the legislation, press, and representatives of large and small agricultural enterprises, were in the room. The timing of this event was important as the comment period on the newly drafted legislation closes on September 12. End Summary.

Completing the Dialogue

[1](#)2. Over the course of the last 12 months and with generous support from EB/TPP/ABT, USDA Foreign Agriculture Service, and valuable assistance from IIP and FAS Vienna, Embassy Ljubljana was able to meet its goals of opening a national dialogue on agricultural co-existence and ensuring that those involved had available to them all the latest scientific information on organic, conventional and biotech farming. In addition to our latest farmer-to-farmer conference, Embassy Ljubljana also produced, in August, a pamphlet in Slovenian explaining the facts and discussing myths and realities of biotech agriculture.

[1](#)3. The September 5 event was held in the Slovenian city of Maribor, close to the Austrian border and deep into Slovenian

farming country. Unfortunately (or fortunately depending on your point of view) after weeks of rain, Slovenia was in the midst of a stretch of fine weather which kept most farmers in their fields and not a hotel conference room. Nonetheless, we are certain that we reached critical players in the co-existence dialogue in Slovenia. In addition to opening remarks by Pol/Econ Chief, Roman Zveglic, president of the Union of Slovenian Farmers, gave opening comments in which he stressed the importance of keeping an open mind on the issue of co-existence and the unique opportunity at hand to talk with farmers from the US and Europe about their experiences. Also attending were the Ministry of Agriculture drafters of the co-existence legislation, press, and representatives of both large and small agricultural enterprises.

Key is Communication

¶4. Both Yoder and Fiddeman stressed the importance of communication between neighbors in ensuring success of co-existence. To the comment that Slovenian farms were too small to support co-existence, both replied that from what they had seen of farms just in their drive from the airport, Slovenia seemed particularly well suited to co-existence because of the many natural barriers that already exist between farms. Also interesting to the audience was Yoder's description of how co-existence worked in the US. He explained that as with all farming, communication between neighbors was key to the integrity of any crop be it conventional, organic or biotech. And, perhaps surprising to the audience, was his comment that in the U.S. legislation was not necessary to ensure co-existence. Another point of interest, and apparent agreement with Slovenia farmers, was that given the proven safety of certain biotech crops, and the increasing demand for organic food, along with a

continuing preference for conventional crops in many cases, profit margins are the deciding factor for what he, and most other farmers, choose to grow.

¶5. The participation of Bob Fiddeman was paid for by the European Association for Bioindustries (ABE) and was important for this event because he represented a positive, European view of co-existence. His presence added legitimacy to the views expressed by the American farmer, demonstrating this was not simply a political policy advocated by the U.S. Government, but a practical issue which would impact farmers' long-term survival.

Positive Impact

¶6. Comment: The timing of this event was serendipitous as it coincided with the comment period on the draft co-existence legislation - something we could not have predicted when originally planning the roundtable. Despite a smaller than hoped for turnout of farmers, we are confident that we reached all the key audiences on the co-existence debate, and we believe that our year-long effort to engage, educate and inform on the benefits of co-existence will reflect positively in Slovenia's co-existence legislation.

ROBERTSON